

Education for Wilmington African Americans

Prior to 1898, Wilmington's African American community had benefited from a progressive educational system. Not only were there publicly supported schools available to blacks in various sections of the city, but there were also several highly respected privately funded schools. The first concerted efforts to establish schools for blacks were those initiated at the end of the Civil War by the Freedmen's Bureau. Following on the heels of the Freedmen's Bureau schools were those established by other northern benevolent interests such as the American Missionary Association (AMA). The Freedmen's Bureau sought to turn operation of schools over to local interests and that was done about 1870 with funding provided by philanthropists. Such schools became the core of the city's school system. Although African American schools continuously experienced low financial support from the city and county both before and after the 1898 coup and violence, the change over time, from 1898 until into the 20th century, was one of continuous reduction in public financial support for the city's African American schools.

One of the leading schools was the Peabody School, named for benefactor George Peabody. Opened soon after the Civil War by northern interests, Peabody was located in Brooklyn and was operated with the assistance of local African American leaders. By October, 1898, Peabody boasted 454 students. In that year it was leased to the city for 25 years for the education of black students in its district.¹ After the turn of the century, the school continued to benefit from the benevolence of the fund created by George Peabody despite cuts to its overall budget by the city. In 1914, the Wilmington Colored Institute, the nonprofit body of African American leaders which managed the school fund, offered to donate the school building to the New Hanover County Board of Education provided that the county construct a new brick building to replace the older wooden structure. The Board refused the donation, indicating that "any public funds at their discretion" would be spent on Williston across town. Three years later it was reported that the school had been repaired and painted and facilities upgraded to benefit the students. Again, in 1919, the school was offered to the county school system. At that time, the deal was consummated and the property turned over to the county and a new school building constructed.² The school became a source of pride for the community and black leaders regularly pressed the Board of Education for improvements to the school facilities.³

Williston Graded School was another school that had lasting impact on the city. Managed by the American Missionary Association after the Civil War, Williston was

¹ Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 148.

² Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 149.

³ Peabody closed in 1985 after the construction of a new school nearby. The building is currently adapted for other uses, including serving as headquarters for a Head Start Program. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 151.